10 December 1959

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief, CAS Division, OCI

ATTENTION: Deputy Chief, CAS Division

SUBJECT: Transmittal of CIA/RR G/I 59-55, The China-India Border Dispute, dated 9 December 1959

Transmitted herewith are two copies of CIA/RR G/I 59-55, The China-India Border Dispute, which is an abbreviated version of CIA/RR GM 59-3, same title, as requested by [redacted] for use in the Current Intelligence Weekly Summary. 25X1A9a

[redacted] 25X1A9a
Acting Chief, Geography Division
Research and Reports

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CIA/RR G/I 59-55
9 December 1959

SUMMARY

The several disputed areas on the China-India border are characterized by high mountains and plateaus, generally little population, and difficulty of access -- particularly from India. Although both India and China have cited maps, treaties, and natural features to support their claims, neither nation can present an entirely clear-cut case, based solely upon terrain and cartographic evidence, for all disputed sectors. The lack of basic information in many areas, complicated by complex historical and legal problems, suggest no easy nor early settlement of the border dispute. (CONFIDENTIAL)

SECRET

CIA/RR G/I 59-55
9 December 1959

THE CHINA-INDIA BORDER DISPUTE

General

The current border dispute between China and India is the outgrowth of a long period of growing tension along China's 2,400-mile frontier from Afghanistan to Burma. Only one small section (the 110-mile Sikkim-Tibet border) has been demarcated on the ground. For the remainder of the border the basis for the alignment is "historical tradition" in the west and the McMahon Line in the east. The setting of the dispute is an area of generally uninhabited high mountains and desolate plateaus. Access to the frontier is difficult, particularly from the low plains of the Indian subcontinent; long, difficult ascents must be made to the high mountainous frontier where even the passes are at elevations of more than 13,000 feet. In contrast the Chinese side of the frontier is backed by plateaus and mountains, generally 14,000 to 16,000 feet high; and access to the border is less arduous.

SECRET

Minor border disputes have punctuated the history of sections of the frontier but, heretofore, conflicting territorial claims have been important only locally. Following the occupation of Sinkiang and Tibet in 1950-51, Peking established military garrisons near the frontier, constructed roads, and initiated surveillance procedures for traders and pilgrims entering Tibet. India reacted by establishing a limited network of frontier posts and beginning the construction of roads into the mountainous frontier lands. Traditional trade relationships became more formalized as China signed agreements first with India (1954) and later with Nepal (1956) by which traders and pilgrims were required to enter western Tibet only by certain designated routes and to trade at specified Tibetan markets. The mutual extension of the area covered by armed patrols along many sections of the frontier following the March 1959 Tibetan revolt eventually culminated in armed clashes along the McMahon Line. In early September 1959 the Government of India published the texts of Sino-Indian notes on the border and related issues since 1954, and thereby focused attention upon the

undefined nature of the frontier, the conflicting cartographic representations of the border, and the various sectors and areas in dispute.

Kashmir-Sinkiang-Tibet Sector (See Map Inset A)

The China-Kashmir frontier in the north is an extensive northwest-southeast-aligned region that extends from Afghanistan to Tibet, a distance of more than 300 miles, and is bordered on north and south by the massive Kunlun and Karakoram Ranges, respectively. Between these great mountain barriers lies a belt of nearly inaccessible high plateau and mountain lands that varies in width from about 50 miles in the west to about 150 miles at the Tibet border. The entire frontier region is high, cold, and barren, with no permanent settlements; only in a few favored valleys is forage sufficient to attract nomads.

Maps of the China-Kashmir border differ widely in their portrayal of the boundary. Both Nationalist and Communist Chinese maps show a border generally following the crest of the Karakoram Mountains; in contrast, some British maps dating back at least to the 1920's show the boundary as following the crest of the Kunluns, far to the north.

British actions to protect India-China trade caravans in the upper Yarkand area north of the Karakoram apparently provided the basis for the British version of the border along the Kunluns. On the latest official Indian and Pakistani maps the border from Afghanistan to the Karakoram Pass agrees in general with the Chinese version; farther east the boundary alignments differ markedly. Indian, British, and United States maps show a boundary following, in part, the crest of the Kunluns to about 80°20'E; from here the line trends southwest and across the Aksai Chin area and joins the Chinese version of the border near the Indus. For the location of the border segment east of the Karakoram Pass, Indian officials apparently have advanced the watershed principle as the chief criterion. The Aksai Chin area, however, consists of a series of interior-drainage basins with circular watersheds, which are nearly meaningless for boundary marking. Soviet maps and the 1953 Survey of Pakistan Political Map show a boundary between the Chinese and Indian versions, but somewhat closer to the Chinese.

Aksai Chin Area: The dispute over the desolate Aksai Chin area involves about 10,000 square miles of uninhabited high plateau with minimum elevations generally above 16,000 feet. Even fuel, fodder, and potable water are difficult to find. In 1958, an Indian patrol sent to investigate the 1957-built Sinkiang-Tibet road was detained by the Chinese; in July 1959, another Indian patrol was detained; and, in October, patrol clashes occurred to the south, with resulting casualties.

The Indians maintain that the 1842 treaty between Kashmir and Tibet (following Kashmiri annexation of Ladakh) established the fact that the border in this area was "well known," the treaty stating in part that "the boundaries of Ladakh and its surroundings [have been] fixed from ancient time," implying that demarcation was not necessary. Since a Tibetan with Chinese rank signed the treaty and the Emperor of China was nominally included as one of the negotiating parties, the Indians argue that China has accepted the "old established frontier." Chou En-lai has denied that China was a party to the 1842 treaty. He agrees that

that there is a "customary line derived from historical tradition separating Ladakh from China but insists that the border shown on Chinese maps -- past and present -- correctly reflects this tradition. The lack of population and administration in the Aksai Chin area suggests that the 1842 treaty may have applied only to the eastern Ladakh border with Tibet and not to Ladakh's northeastern border with Sinkiang.

Although Nehru has pressed India's claim to the Aksai Chin area, his remarks to Parliament indicate that it is in a different category from other disputed areas. On 12 September, Nehru stated, "It is a matter for argument as to what part of it belongs to us and what part of it belongs to somebody else ... . This particular area stands by itself. It has been in challenge all the time."

Pangong Tso and Spanggur Tso Area: Several Ladakh-Tibet border areas just south of the Aksai Chin also are disputed, the major problems being the interpretation of the "customary line" cited in the 1842 treaty and the determination of major watersheds. In the Pangong-Spanggur Tso (lake) area, about 750 square miles are in dispute. The area is

probably inhabited only seasonally by nomads and their flocks. North of Pangong Tso, Chinese maps -- and most other maps except those of Indian and Pakistani origin -- show a boundary generally following the watershed between the upper Shyok tributaries and the interior drainage basins of the Tibetan plateau; Indian maps show a border some 10 to 15 miles to the east. At Khurnak Fort (ancient ruins) and Spanggur Camping Grounds at the western end of the lake, border incidents have occurred recently. Chinese troops west of Spanggur reportedly are but 8 miles from an Indian landing strip at Chusul. Considering only physical geography, the Chinese version of the border north of Pangong Tso and in the immediate vicinity of Spanggur Tso appears logical. A 1924 British-Tibetan conference over disputed pasture areas did not, however, challenge Indian jurisdiction over Khurnak Fort, thus supporting the Indian version of the boundary at Pangong Tso.

Demchhog Area: In southeastern Ladakh, Indian and Chinese maps vary in showing where the border crosses the Indus, with Indian maps

placing the border about 20 miles farther upstream than the Chinese and most other maps. Explorers' notes (1908) indicate a Ladakh-Tibet boundary near Demchhog, roughly in line with the Indian claims. Thus far, no clashes in this area have been reported, but the divergence noted on the maps suggests that the Demchhog area is a likely trouble spot -- particularly since the caravan trail following the Indus Valley is one of the routes of entry specified in the 1954 Sino-Indian Trade Convention.

Southwestern Tibet-India Sector

From Ladakh to Nepal, the India-Tibet border follows generally the water-parting range between the two countries. The border disputes here have had their origin in ancient Tibetan claims and in uncertainty as to which passes are on the water divide. India cites as support for its claims (based on tradition and the water-divide criterion) the acceptance by China of the six passes specified in the 1954 Sino-Indian Trade Agreement as the only ones to be used by Indian traders and pilgrims; this leaves in doubt, however, the border alignment in

other parts of the frontier. The Chinese claim that the delimitation of the border is subject to negotiation since frontier disputes have occurred in the past and the border has never been formally demarcated. Although Chinese and Indian maps differ significantly only in the Nilang area, Chinese incursions and recent disputes have occurred in several other places -- notably at Shipki Pass, Lapthal, and in the Spiti area.

The immediate frontier area is inhabited only during summer and fall, when alpine pastures can be grazed, the high passes are open and the Bhotias (Tibetan-related groups on the Indian side of the mountains) cross the area on trading missions to and from Tibet. Traditionally, Tibetan officials levied taxes on Bhotia traders and the Bhotias on Tibetans who ventured south of the passes -- a practice continued even during the period of British administration.

Nilang Area (See Map Inset B): The largest area in dispute is north of Nilang, a small semipermanently inhabited village about 20 miles south of the water-divide passes. Indian maps mark the border along the

passes on the line of water parting, whereas Chinese maps show a line running northwest-southeast just north of Milang village. The uncertain status of the area is reflected on older maps of India (and the recent 1957 London Times Atlas) produced by the British and on US-produced maps, which show a border approximately in agreement with Chinese maps. The Indians maintain that a meeting between British and Tibetan officials in 1926 produced considerable evidence of past Indian ownership of this area.

Bara Koti Area (See Map Inset B): The Bara Koti area (called Wu-je by the Chinese) is a small upland pasture a few miles southeast of the Niti Pass. Numerous notes have been exchanged between India and China since 1954 over its ownership, and both Chinese and Indian patrols have alternately occupied the area. India claims that the border follows the major water divide (the Niti, Tunjun, and Thalshal Passes); the Chinese view presumably is that the border runs south from the Niti Pass through the Chor Koti Pass, several miles south and west of the Indian line. Curiously, however, Chinese maps showing

the boundary delineation agree with the Indian maps. Part of the trouble arises from the nature of the water divide, which is relatively inconspicuous, with no high peaks or difficult passes marking its crest. Such features do exist along the Chinese-claimed border.

Assam-Tibet Sector

The dispute over India's North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) involves an area of about 26,000 square miles inhabited by roughly 500,000 to 800,000 primitive hill tribesmen. The area is of a belt of steep hill and mountain terrain 90 to 100 miles wide that rises sharply from the Brahmaputra plains to the crest of the Great Himalaya and associated ranges, which coincide with the McMahon Line. The Chinese-claimed border generally runs along the southern margin of the hills. This is by far the most difficult of the Himalayan areas to penetrate from the plains. Heavy rains continue from June through October; dense, tangled forests choke the valleys and cover much of the hill country; landslides are common and earthquakes not infrequent. The various tribal groups have little outside contact beyond petty trade

with one another or with Tibet and Assam. Although groups in the northwestern part of the Kameng Division have close ethnic and cultural ties with Tibet, most of the hill tribes appear to have little kinship with either the Assamese plains dwellers or the Tibetans.

The dispute over the NEFA area concerns the validity of the tripartite 1914 Simla Convention -- signed by Great Britain and Tibet but not by China -- and the appended convention map upon which the Tibet-India border (McMahon Line) was drawn. The primary purpose of the convention was to clarify Tibet's relationships with India (Great Britain) and China. India points out that subsequent Chinese protests over the Simla agreement were concerned with these relationships -- particularly the delimitation of Inner and Outer Tibet -- not with the McMahon Line. Chou En-lai, however, claims the McMahon Line to be "illegal" since China did not sign or ratify the Simla Convention, although he maintains that Tibet was then and is still part of China and cites old maps to support the Chinese claims.

With the possible exception of the Towang area, most of the NEFA appears to have had no administration in times past from India, Tibet, or China. Before 1900 the British had made pacts with the various hill tribes designed to keep them from raiding the plains dwellers; but civil administration of the area was left largely unattended. Despite the drawing of the McMahon Line in 1914, almost nothing was done thereafter to extend administrative control into the hills; and, until shortly before World War II, most British maps continued to show either a boundary at the line separating hill tribes from the plains dwellers (which is in accord with most Chinese maps) or no boundary at all. In 1943-44 the British attempted to "make good" the McMahon Line, a policy continued after 1947 in India. Administrative control was slowly extended; airstrips were built to supply outlying valleys; and, more recently, roads have been constructed linking the plains with the headquarters of the Kameng and Subansiri Divisions. In 1954, India was able to install a pro-India abbot at the important Towang Monastery, thus reducing Lhasa's religious ties

with the area. Chinese occupation of Tibet resulted in approved communications within Tibet and in an extension of Chinese military and civil control to areas adjacent to the McMahon Line. After the March 1959 uprising in Tibet, several Indian posts were moved to the border vicinity (Longju outpost was occupied in April). Border clashes occurred at Longju and Khinzemane in August.

Prospects for Future Settlement

The undefined status of almost all of the China-India frontier and the wording of recent Chinese pronouncements suggest that other areas may eventually be disputed. Nepal is concerned, since its 550-mile border with Tibet is undefined and since some minor differences in the boundary alignment may appear on Chinese- and Indian-produced maps. Furthermore, Chinese maps have shown parts of Bhutan -- primarily in the southeast -- as belonging to Tibet. Recent interference with Bhutanese couriers and officials in charge of tiny Bhutanese enclaves in western Tibet suggests the possibility of future problems.

Maps of various dates and by different authorities have been used by both China and India to support their versions of the border alignment. These maps, however, merely reflect the lack of border surveys and the poorly mapped nature of some frontier sections. As indicated by the exchanges between Nehru and Chou En-lai, Indian and British maps could be used to support both Indian and Chinese claims; and, conversely, some Chinese maps could be cited to support either position. To further confuse the issue from the point of view of the United States interest in the problem, maps produced by the US Government have not in all cases been consistent in their treatment of the border; at present the border delineation on official US maps differs in places from that on both Indian and Chinese maps.

Neither India nor China can make an entirely open-and-shut case for its position on all disputed areas. Aside from the onerous task of evaluating the relative validity of Chinese and Indian claims, negotiations over many of the disputed areas will be hampered and confused by the lack of basic surveys and accurate maps. The complexity

of these problems coupled with the lack of basic information suggests that any final settlement of the border will neither be soon nor easily accomplished.